

# THE WAY THE WORLD SHOULD BE: ORDER, CLEANNESS, AND SERENITY IN THE EXPERIENCE OF SPECIAL PLACES

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## Abstract

To understand why people consider certain places to be special, I did surveys asking people to explain what such places mean to them. This paper focuses on five related themes that appeared in the responses: rightness, order, cleanness, serenity, and paradise. Rightness, order, and cleanness all suggest that things are in their right places or in the right relationship with each other. In some of the special place descriptions, a sense of rightness or order gave rise to the experience of serenity. In several of the place descriptions, people likened their special places to paradise or heaven, which can be seen as a place of ultimate rightness, order, and peace. Experiencing a place as paradise may not require the exclusion of human influence. When people interact with a natural place in appropriate ways, the human presence may be experienced as blending into the natural order rather than as an intrusion.

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## 1.0 Introduction

The attachments that many people feel toward special places in natural environments are a vital part of their lives. The importance of taking these attachments into account has been increasingly recognized in the field of resource management over the last several years. For example, Williams et al. (1992) challenged the prevailing commodity metaphor for recreation settings, which views settings as if they were mass-produced consumer products, and presented data on the unique emotional and symbolic attachments that people have to wilderness places. Mitchell et al. (1993) discussed several possible ways of incorporating emotional attachments to special places into the planning process for public land management. Williams and Stewart (1998) examined the emerging concept of “sense of place” and offered recommendations for how it can be applied to ecosystem management. By analyzing written public comments on a National Forest’s management plans and projects, Vining and Tyler (1999) showed how people’s concerns over public land management are motivated by their underlying values and emotions relating to the

environment. Bott et al. (2003) recently reviewed the literature on studies of place and found it relevant to issues of mental health, education, communication, and public involvement in ecosystem management.

In order to take people’s feelings and place attachments into account, natural resource managers need to understand why people consider certain places to be special. What is it about these places that makes them so important to people? To help answer this question, I have done a series of surveys asking people to explain in their own words what special places mean to them. The locales targeted by the surveys range from the rustic north woods of Wisconsin and Michigan to the industrialized southeast side of Chicago. This paper focuses on a particular set of interrelated themes that emerged from these surveys.

## 2.0 Methods

Participants in the surveys were recruited by a variety of means, including announcements and fliers distributed by mail, at meetings of interest groups and organizations, in local newspapers, and at offices of land management agencies. The participants were a self-selected sample of people who felt strongly enough about at least one special place to take the time to write about it on the survey.

Participants were invited to think of one or more places that were important, special, or memorable to them within a particular geographic area. They were instructed to briefly describe each place and to express whatever thoughts, feelings, memories, and associations came to mind in connection with these places, as well as any general comments they had about the locale covered by the survey and about the survey itself. Participants were provided with forms on which to write their responses and a stamped envelope for mailing back the completed form. Some basic information about the surveys is given in Table 1.

## 3.0 Analysis

Taken together, these surveys span a wide diversity of people and special places located on both public and private land. One hundred fifteen people participated in the surveys, including life-long residents, seasonal vacationers, first-time visitors, recreationists,

**Table 1.—The Special-Places Surveys**

Location	Date	Respondents	N of Respondents	N of Place Descriptions
Morton Arboretum, Lisle, IL	1986	Arboretum members and volunteers	29	126
Black River, MI	1993	Residents and visitors	24	66
MI Upper Peninsula	1996	Commercial woodland managers	15	36
Chequamegon Area, WI	1996	Residents and visitors	11	33
Moose Lake, WI	1997	Residents	10	20
Lake Calumet Area, Chicago	2000	Residents and visitors	26	77
Total			115	358

environmentalists, and natural resource professionals. Between them, these people wrote 358 separate descriptions of special places, plus numerous additional comments.

I analyzed each survey individually using a method similar to the open coding procedure described by Strauss and Corbin (1990). I read all the responses and identified features of special places and commonly occurring themes in the respondents' experiences of those places. Summaries of these features and themes were presented to natural resource managers and planners to assist them in planning for the areas in which the special places were located. The themes found in the individual surveys have been described in several earlier publications (Schroeder 1991, 1996, 2000, 2002).

After completing the last of the individual surveys, I merged the responses from all of the surveys into a single large data set and revisited the place descriptions to follow up on some of the prominent themes that I found in the individual analyses. I read through the combined data set several times, identifying recurring themes and linkages between themes that helped to explain what made these places special to the survey respondents. This paper is a preliminary report of one interesting subset of the overall results of this combined analysis.

#### 4.0 Results

This paper focuses on a cluster of five related themes that emerged from the qualitative analysis of the combined special places survey data. These themes all express, in one way or another, the idea that things in the place being described are the way they ought to be. The five themes are *rightness*, *order*, *cleanness*, *serenity*, and *paradise*. These themes and the connections between them are discussed below, with illustrative quotations from the survey responses.

Some of the descriptions of special places convey the theme of *rightness*, by which I mean the belief that the place is perfect, ideal, or just right in some regard.

“The perfect place to relax and unwind from the rigors of daily life.”

“This is the ideal creek for walking around, sloshing; sitting down on a hot summer day.”

“A small reminder that this is the way the world should be, or was, as viewed from the edge of a small Illinois Prairie town in early childhood.”

The sense of a place being perfect or ideal is sometimes expressed by likening it to a work of art.

“Rather like a living piece of artwork in its impact.”

Some of the descriptions suggest that there is a quality of *order* within these settings. Order implies that the components of the setting are in a right relationship with each other, perhaps with a sense of balance or harmony.

“[The place] appears orderly, in balance and inviting.”

“The towering pines behind [the building], and slender trees before it harmonize with its architecture.”

Another related theme refers to the *cleanness* or neatness of a place. Anthropologist Mary Douglas (1984) has pointed out a conceptual relationship between the ideas of order and cleanness. She defines dirt as matter out of place. If we apply this definition to the natural environment, then litter and pollution (two forms of environmental “dirt”) could be seen as disruptions in the natural order of a place. Drawing on Douglas' ideas,

Westphal (1999) has found that the concepts of clean and dirty are important in urban residents' accounts of the physical and social order (or lack thereof) in their neighborhood environment.

Some descriptions from the special places surveys seemed to associate cleanness with the naturalness of the setting. This was especially the case with the cleanness and clarity of the water and air.

“A small lake in a wilderness area - clean & wild.”

“A beautiful, clean area that people can see nature in all its glory.”

In other cases, cleanness implied that the place is well-kept, that people are taking good care of it.

“To see ... clean grass everywhere is a pleasure to everyone. It's really kept clean and I like that.”

Similarly, references to neatness also suggested a human role in keeping places in an orderly condition.

“The picnic area is always so neat and clean; it is very inviting.”

“I try to pick up ‘throw-aways’ along Black River Road as I have my daily walk. The area is for everyone to enjoy and I live here, it's my home and homes should be neat, inside and outside, private or public. Black River area is neat!”

In some of the special place descriptions, a sense of rightness and order seemed to give rise to the experience of *serenity*.

“When I find myself walking in this area I have a sense of well-being and peace. It has the appearance of orderliness. It imparts a sense of quiet and restfulness.”

“A perfect scene to paint. It seems to have everything and all in the right places & scaled correctly. Serene.”

The reason for this could be that when everything is as it should be, nothing needs to be done. A person can relax and be at peace because the place does not call on them to take any action to improve or correct things. On the

other hand, when litter or some other form of disorder throws things out of their right places and relationships, it may create a sense of unrest. A person might feel that the place calls for some kind of action to restore it to its right condition.

For a few people, the feeling of things being the way they should be seems to have an explicitly spiritual or religious dimension.

“[The vista] brings such a feeling of serenity. It makes me feel that ‘God's in His heaven’ and ‘all's right with the world’.”

In several of the place descriptions, people likened their special places to *paradise* or heaven.

“Morgan Falls is a small piece of paradise.”

“This area is actually heaven on earth!”

The concept of paradise is related to the preceding ones, because paradise can be seen as a place of ultimate rightness, order, and peace—where things are always exactly as they should be and always in the right relationship to each other. Paradise may also imply an original, pristine order that has not been disrupted by inappropriate human actions.

“It is so beautiful and unspoiled. How fortunate we are that someone had the forethought to set aside such a paradise.”

In some cases, people's descriptions suggested that nature is to be found in separation from humanity. Their special place was a place where they could experience the original, natural order without human interference.

“This is a rare place, where nature, more than man, is running the show.”

“Some part of this area may resemble areas where man hasn't left his imprint—where forces other than man determine the consequences.”

Other passages suggest, however, that experiencing a place as a natural paradise may not always require the exclusion of human influence. That is, it may not be the mere presence of humans that disrupts the sense of

rightness in a natural place, but the particular way in which humans and their artifacts relate to the natural aspects of the setting. When human influence seems contrary to the order or harmony of a natural setting, then the human presence is experienced as an intrusion or a violation of nature.

“Keep out the ATV’s, the joy riders, and those who would cut and spoil the wilderness. Please, no more improvements!”

“The area is special too, because it is not commercial and is still wild and free. More roads and more buildings would change all that.”

But when people live within and relate to a natural place in ways that maintain a sense of harmony and rightness in the place, then the human presence may be experienced as blending into or cooperating with the natural order, rather than as an intrusion.

“Across the pond the restaurant building seems to blend into the scene giving a feeling of man & nature as one & blended. This building does not offend nature but enhances it.”

“Man and nature working together to create beauty.”

## 5.0 Conclusions

It seems that for at least some of the people who responded to these surveys, the specialness of a special place involves a sense of everything existing in a harmonious order, in which things are just the way they ought to be. This sense of rightness can give rise to a feeling of peacefulness and a metaphorical identification of the special place with heaven or paradise. This experience of order and rightness is often associated with original, non-human nature, but in some cases human influence is seen as harmonizing with the natural order in such a way that the human presence enhances rather than intrudes on nature. From an experiential perspective, the question of whether or not human beings are a part of the natural order thus does not have a simple yes or no answer. Rather than reducing this question to a simplistic dichotomy of humans being “part of nature” versus “apart from nature”, these results suggest that the survey respondents hold a more nuanced view. They see some human activities and actions as disrupting or intruding on nature and others as respecting and cooperating with

nature. Thus a sense of order and rightness that includes both natural and human influences can be maintained in the special place, but only if humans behave appropriately with respect to nature.

In the survey responses, people often commented that they love their special places just the way they are and do not want to see them changed by inappropriate human activity. This is not at all surprising. After all, how can you improve on paradise? People were very apprehensive about any changes that would increase the level of use or alter the natural character of the place. At the same time, they were often very appreciative of management actions and facilities that provided services and access to their places, as long as they blended into and did not clash with the natural qualities of the environment. This suggests that the questions of how much and what kind of human alteration of the environment is appropriate in a special place do not have a simple or universal answer.

This presents a challenge for managers and planners who may sometimes see a need to make changes in someone’s special place for various reasons. The themes presented here suggest that managers should make a special effort to listen to residents and visitors to learn what characteristics of special places are important to the sense of rightness and order that people may experience there. Any changes that are proposed should as much as possible harmonize with and not detract from these characteristics. If for compelling reasons management actions are necessary that may conflict with people’s sense of harmony and rightness in such a place, then managers should be prepared to devote plenty of time and effort to communicating with the public, gaining their trust, involving them in the planning process, and adapting plans as much as possible to protect the qualities that make these places special. A genuine interest in and respect for how people experience their special places is the necessary starting point for this kind of collaboration.

## 6.0 Citations

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